

One Final Goodbye

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Summary: After the Ascension is thwarted, Buffy and Angel see each other one more time before he leaves.

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Dedicated to Serena Ali for her kind help and inspiration.

Partly inspired by the song 'Everlong' by the Foo Fighters.

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The lone vampire walked slowly up the hill until he reached the peak. On one side of him, the highway stretched into the distance, an open road to fresh possibilities and a new beginning. On the other side, were three long years of history, both bitter and sweet, and the love of his life.

He waited, caught in indecision, looking from one side to the other, on the cusp of an earthshaking choice. He started as he heard soft footsteps brushing through the grass behind him.

"Thought you could sneak out quietly, huh?" Buffy strolled up to him, subdued, her hands jammed into the pockets of a light jacket.

"I-I wasn't-" he protested, dropping his travel bag to the grass.

"Yes, you were." She turned her back to him, staring out over the vista at the highway, "But you can't just leave without saying goodbye."

His face turned serious and stern and his eyes fell to the ground.

"We've said all there is to say." He said, "There's nothing more we can do. I have to do this."

"Then why were you still standing here when I found you?" she turned, her eyes shimmering.

"I-I don't know." He lied, refusing to look her in the eye.

"I do." She whispered, her voice straining with emotion. Walking quickly over to him, she touched her hand to his cheek and turned his face toward her. "Don't go. I know I've said this before, but, please, don't go."

"Buffy . . ." he brushed the back of his fingers softly along the contour of her cheek, his face softened and his dark eyes filled with pain and sympathy for her.

"No!" she shook away the tender touch, her eyes brimming with tears, "When you leave, how do I know if I'll ever see you again? I can't live without you. I'll die."

"Don't say that." He shook his head sadly, taking her face in both of his hands, then looked directly, purposefully, into her eyes, "The connection we have cannot be severed. Not by a hundred miles, not by a thousand. I went to Hell and never forgot your name. Nothing on Earth can change what we have."

She burst into silent tears, and buried her face in his shoulder. He held her close, stroking his fingers through her hair consolingly.

"I feel like I'm losing you forever!" she wailed into the shoulder of his coat, "I don't think I can do it. I can't live without you."

"Yes, you can." He looked up at the stars and smiled bittersweetly, "You're strong, Buffy. You've faced down the greatest fears that man has ever known. I'll always be out there for you, you know that. I love you."

She pulled back, wiping the salty tears from her cheeks and sniffing. A mild smile poked through her sadness. "Thank you. I love you, too. That's what makes this so hard."

"I know." He agreed sadly. "But we can't change that now. We both knew this had to happen."

She touched the tips of her fingers to his face, memorizing every ridge and contour of his features knowing that this was possibly the last time she would ever see him.

"At first, I thought I could come up here and catch you, make you change your mind and stay." She stared lovingly at him, the tears just barely held back, "But I see that isn't going to happen. I think I knew it from the beginning."

"Then what brought you?" Angel was feeling weak again. Holding her in his arms like this and allowing his feelings to rise to the surface made him reconsider his decision again. Duty warred with desire as he swallowed hard, his insides in utter turmoil.

Without warning, she kissed him with passionate intensity. He held her to him, meeting the kiss with raw hunger, every ounce of uncertainty, fear and regret focused into the sweet connection of their lips. They held the embrace, Buffy slowly pushing her breath into his lungs until she was forced to break for air.

Beyond words, he released her and stepped back, his lungs full and an ache pounding in his chest like the heart that no longer beat there. For an instant, he imagined that he was alive again. She drew her hands across his, lingering at the last moment as only the tips of their fingers touched.

"Hold that breath." She whispered, fresh tears streaming down her face, "Hold it and hold me in you forever."

His eyes moist, he pursed his lips, touching his fingers to them, then pressing the same fingers to her mouth.

He picked up his travel bag and turned, taking the first painful steps down the far side of the hill toward the highway.

Buffy stood, frozen to the spot with tear-drenched cheeks, watching the greatest feeling she had ever experienced leave her. At last she understood why she had come up here. It had been for one final goodbye.

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